

# In the Service of Empire: Imperialism and the British Spy Thriller 1901–1914

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In the decade before the First World War, the British spy thriller was a cultural phenomenon drawing large and expectant readerships across all classes and catapulting its authors to prominence as spokesmen for then widely prevalent concerns about imperial strength, national power, and foreign espionage. Three hundred is a conservative estimate of the number of spy novels that went into print between 1901 and 1914. This article reflects upon some of the seminal publications from the period, including Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the tale of a streetwise orphan who trains as a spy and becomes embroiled in the intelligence duel on India's North-West Frontier; Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), the story of two gentleman yachtsmen who, cruising in the North Sea, stumble upon a secret German plot to invade England; and William le Queux's *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909), a dire prophecy of German espionage in advance of an invasion.

In recent years, intelligence historians have become increasingly interested in spy fiction. A

sure sign of this was a special issue of the journal, *Intelligence and National Security*, published in 2008, devoted entirely to “Spying in Film and Fiction.” Another indicator was the appearance in June 2009 of a supplemental edition of *Studies in Intelligence* in which practicing intelligence officers considered contemporary fiction in literature, film, and television.

Historiography on the subject has tended to hinge on the issue of realism or, put another way, the symbiosis between real spies and fictional spies. In keeping with the growing influence of “new literary historicism,” which seeks to demonstrate how both canonical literature and, perhaps even more so, “low” or “popular” works can be quarried for historical meaning, scholars like Allan Hepburn have scrutinized *Kim* and *The Riddle* to see whether they reconstitute the “intelligence cycle” with accuracy or even disclose tradecraft.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Great Game: The Myths and Reality of Espionage*, Fred Hitz, a former inspector general of the Cen-

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Central Intelligence Agency, suggested that there is a clear overlap between “real” intelligence, and the fiction of Kipling and Childers.<sup>2</sup> In a recent article for the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Adam Svendsen proposed that the works of many spy novelists offer a near perfect window onto intelligence processes.<sup>3</sup> In a field notorious for its lack of declassified material, Svendsen continues, intelligence history would be greatly enriched if scholars invested a little more time thumbing through fictitious renderings of the sub rosa world. The fact that many authors were themselves veterans of intelligence is frequently highlighted to add credibility to this sort of approach.

We are not, however, of the opinion that the spy thriller is mimetic of real-life spying. While generally true-to-life when it comes to the “period details” of intelligence (disguises, sketch-books, etc.), spy novels are affected by commercial concerns such as the need for dramatic impact. As the best-selling spy writer Graham Greene concedes: “A novel based on life in Secret Service must necessarily contain a large element of fantasy.” As outsiders, moreover, how can we hope to distinguish, with any certainty, the authentic intrigue narratives from the apocryphal yarns dressed up as “real”? The words of Allen Dulles, former director of the

CIA, seem apposite: “The operations of an intelligence service and the plots of most spy stories part company, never to meet again.”<sup>4</sup>

Rather than appraising fin de siècle spy novels as documentation for the scholar of intelligence (and then immediately finding them wanting), we will consider the historical context within which they were produced and received. What interests us about these texts is that they reflected real geopolitical anxieties that existed at the time. Set against the backdrop of the “Great Game,” the protracted strategic conflict between Britain, France, and Tsarist Russia in Central Asia, *Kim* is dark meditation on Russian imperial expansion and intrigues toward India. Brewed within the atmosphere of national soul-searching at the end of the Boer War, *The Riddle* is a prophetic vision of the Great War, making graspable the growing capacity of Germany as an adversarial sea power. *Spies of the Kaiser*, meanwhile, ostensibly chronicled the discovery of foreign espionage networks at a time when minds were increasingly centered on the actual machinations of German intelligence. We contend in this article that early 20th century spy fiction was designed, above all else, to alert both the government and the people of England to the vulnerabilities of the British Empire.

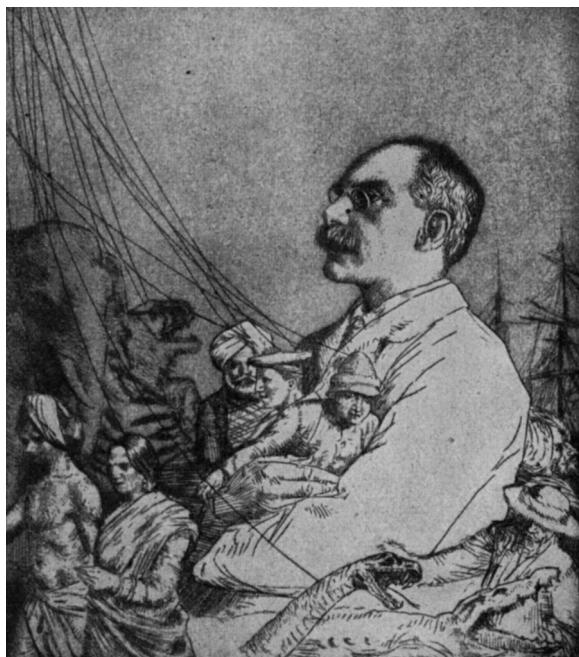
Unashamedly patriotic, their political sensibilities “finely tuned to the cadences of imperial decline,” authors wanted to see more being done by the authorities.<sup>5</sup> For example, Kipling supported Lord Roberts’s call for a more robust defense of Empire; Childers sought to garner public opinion in support of new naval bases and a rapid expansion of the fleet; and le Queux demanded the creation of a domestic intelligence service to combat the German ogre, an enemy with whom the day of reckoning was inevitable. We will also show here that certain authors quickly realized that whipping up popular concerns was a profitable enterprise. Le Queux was by far the wiliest, reaping massive financial rewards by sensationalizing the extant threats facing the nation.

Admittedly, this is not entirely new ground. In their larger histories of the British intelligence community, Christopher Andrew and Bernard Porter have both shown convincingly how popular authors from the period were implicated in the business of “scare-mongering,” giving voice to a range of public anxieties, from the vulnerability of Britain’s defensive preparations to the specter of foreign espionage.<sup>6</sup> David French, David Trotter, and Nicholas Hiley have also provided important contributions on the role of spy fiction in stirring up a hornet’s nest of tension before the First World War.<sup>7</sup>

We nevertheless feel that there are two avenues that

require further analysis. First, there is a tendency in the existing literature to suggest that the threats discussed in spy fiction had little or no grounding in reality. Authors, it is often said, were spinning mysteries out of airy nothings, so motivated were they by commercial gains. Yet such a judgment seems too conclusive: there is a difference between exaggeration and pure invention. Russia did annex strategically sensitive areas in Central Asia with the intention of putting diplomatic pressure on Britain; Germany was building a battle-fleet with which to challenge British imperial hegemony. Authors, moreover, recognized that the best and most profitable fantasy conveyed some real truth.

Secondly, we would like to show how certain spy novels



Drawing of Rudyard Kipling published in *The Bookman* in 1903. ©Lebrecht/Corbis

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carried huge weight in the defense councils of Empire, precipitating significant changes in actual policymaking. Although historically, officials demurred at giving credence to works of fiction, between 1901 and 1914, the opposite was true: intrigue narratives were taken seriously in the corridors of power.

### ***I. Kim and the External Threat to Empire***

In Kipling's enigmatic story *Kim*, the orphaned boy with mixed parentage is perfectly suited to move between the world of Europeans and the people of the colony and, as such, is by far the best asset for maintaining surveillance and gathering HUMINT.<sup>8</sup> Chal-

lenged by Colonel Creighton, the fictional head of the Intelligence Department, to join his team of trained local agents, his missions ranged from eavesdropping to the interception of seditious messages. Kipling gave moral backing to intelligence work by suggesting that it safeguarded the empire and thwarted heinous plots. Mahbub Ali reassures Kim that his delivery of a key message ensured: "The game is well played. That war

is done now and the evil we hope nipped before the flower, thanks to me and thee."

The literature on *Kim* is voluminous and well-trodden.<sup>9</sup> Critics of colonial discourse point to a range of moral flaws in Kipling's work.<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, who in 2000 wrote an introduction to a reprinted edition, felt that orientalist values permeated the novel to the extent that it was "a masterpiece of imperialism."<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars have dismissed the idea that *Kim* contains any "reality" at all. Gerald Morgan believed that it "owed practically everything to Kipling's imagination"; the only thing that was not an invention was his use of the term "The Great Game."<sup>12</sup> Morgan argued there was no secret world of intelligence throughout either northern India or Central Asia. He argued that even the Indian Survey Department, employing a number of Asian agents, was not engaged in intelligence work, stating that it was strictly limited to gathering topographical information. Morgan played down the importance of the actual Intelligence Department in India, maintaining that its tasks were only really those of "collating information," whilst the Political Service, formed in 1820, was little more than a diplomatic corps designed to send agents to neighboring states.<sup>13</sup>

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Agents rarely collected information on the Russians and had no powers to make treaties. Their “special duty” was carried out quite openly with letters of introduction for the rulers they visited. British officers, meanwhile, never entered Russian territory without permission. Morgan even questioned the success of the actual intelligence officers, doubting if there was anything that they really achieved, beyond gathering tidbits of geographical knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

## **II. Reflections of Reality in Kipling’s Kim**

If, as we suggest, spy thrillers reflected anxieties and aspirations of the period, to what extent does *Kim* fulfill these concerns? Kim is portrayed as a boy familiar with intrigue. Initially, he acts as a courier even though he did not understand the contents of the messages he carried, for “what he loved was the game for its own sake.”<sup>15</sup> Over time, however, he is drawn deeper into the world of espionage. He delivers a vital document to the head of British intelligence in India. Its contents revealed the activities of “a Hindu banker in Peshawar, a firm of gun makers in Belgium and an important semi-independent Mohammedan ruler.”<sup>16</sup> For spy chiefs, the document highlighted a catalogue of threats: Imperial Russia, disloyal Indians in

positions of influence, and gun-runners from Europe who could supply the latest firearms to an Indian force. The reference to a Mohammedan ruler not only evoked concerns that a princely state might secretly foster sedition against the Raj in defiance of British paramountcy, but also drew on imperial Islamophobia.

In the novel’s climax, Kim steals the plans of a Russian and a Frenchman, who are carrying out clandestine survey work on the mountain approaches to India. He passes them, at the cost of his cover—and almost his life—to Colonel Creighton back in Simla. Here, Kipling articulated a deep-seated anxiety of the period. In 1894, the Franco-Russian Alliance brought together Britain’s chief colonial rivals and raised the specter that Britain might have to wage war on several fronts. Between 1894 and 1899, when the novel was written, the Russian army marched into the Pamirs and, at Somatash, clashed with the Afghans, whom Britain was pledged to protect.

Anxieties in Whitehall about a Russian threat to the landward borders of India can be traced back to the 1830s. They were magnified, however, from the 1870s onwards by the Tsarist annexation of the khanates of the old Silk Route, which brought the Russians closer to the subcontinent. Statesmen and military planners faced an

all too familiar intelligence dilemma: what were the enemy’s real intentions and capabilities in the region, and what should the response be?

While some deplored alarmist reactions to Russian expansion, others pointed to evidence of more sinister designs: the discovery of secret Russian military plans (1886); border skirmishes between the Tsar’s forces and Britain’s Afghan allies (1885, 1892, and 1894); and the arrival of “shooting parties,” “scientific explorers,” and armed Cossack patrols in the mountain passes on India’s northern border (1887 and 1888). Such groups seemed to suggest an intention to stir up the peoples of South Asia against British rule, perhaps as a prelude to a more serious attack through Afghanistan.

Although the British had managed to crush the Indian Mutiny in 1857, there was widespread concern that they might have to fight a border war against tribesmen and Russian forces, while trying to suppress an internal revolt at the same time. This internal dimension is often overlooked, but the mood of the Indian population was an important element in the calculations of the British authorities.

Kipling was certainly well-informed about the Great Game. As a young journalist at Simla, he read Maj. Gen. Charles MacGregor’s *Defence of India* (1884), which was regarded as the handbook of the hawkish “Forward School.”

He was also briefed on the Russian threat to the borders of India by Maj. Gen. (later Lord) Frederick Roberts, commander-in-chief of the Indian Army.

Affectionately known as “Our Bobs,” Roberts was a national hero, celebrated in novels, paintings, and music. Kipling was in Simla with Roberts when the Penjdeh Incident occurred—a moment when war with Russia appeared to be imminent. Moreover, Kipling knew that the frequent skirmishes on the North-West Frontier were fought to pacify the tribesmen who lived astride the potential lines of communications into Afghanistan, where, according to Roberts, the British Indian Army would have to fight the Russians.

Roberts advocated a “Scientific Frontier” for India, not along the administrative line which marked the political border of India, but deep inside Afghanistan along the watershed of the Hindu Kush. Disguised as a native, Kipling emulated the Great Game agents to move among the Afghans and Pathans.<sup>17</sup> He visited Jamrud and interviewed soldiers with experience in frontier warfare. He gleaned information through the social events of Simla. Kipling also drew inspiration from hiking in the Himalayan foothills. Indeed, the climax of Kim’s mission is acted out in the same remote mountain setting.

Kipling’s conversations with Roberts were critical in shaping *Kim*. Roberts believed that the Russian threat to India was

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the single most important feature of Imperial defense. He drafted no less than 20 reports on the defense of India between 1877 and 1893, advocated an increase in the size of the Indian Army (especially British battalions), and championed the creation of an Indian Intelligence Branch to scout beyond the frontier.<sup>18</sup> As an admirer of Roberts, Kipling naturally seized on these concerns and adapted them in his story.<sup>19</sup>

To fashion the novel’s backdrop, Kipling used his knowledge of Simla to create both atmosphere and character: the slums of Lahore provided the setting for Kim’s early life, whilst Lurgan Sahib was based on the Armenian Jew, A.M. Jacob, who arrived in the cantonment in 1871, and who was later ruined in 1891 after a protracted legal case with the Nizam of Hyderabad.<sup>20</sup>

In *Kim*, Kipling fused fictional British intelligence operations with the real work of the Indian Survey Department, which employed Asian agents with cryptonyms like “The Mirza” or “E5,” to create a hybrid organization deeply engaged in counterintelligence activities on the frontiers and within the Indian subcontinent. Other than Colonel Creighton (who, as “Control,” is naturally British), Kipling’s heroes are all Asian: the Afghan horse trader, Mahbub

Ali; the Indian master of disguises, Hurree Babu; and the mysterious agent E23. For Kipling, it was essential that a successful intelligence organization recruited from a target region employed expert linguists and, where possible, exploited those who already worked in the enemy’s senior ranks.

The hiring of local Asian agents was common practice.<sup>21</sup> Attachés, consuls and news-writers—the name given to local spies hired by British political officers—gradually became a more permanent arrangement. There were “listening posts” at Peshawar, Gilgit, Chitral, Kandahar, Kabul, Tehran, and Meshed from where local agents could be dispatched. Ad hoc arrangements were made by more “nomadic” expeditions too, for example, by boundary commissions and by agents traversing the Hindu Kush or Pamirs.

Indian merchants could also be used as the eyes and ears of the Empire. James Onley has shown, with reference to the Persian Gulf, that Indian merchants were important in creating access to local elites and their networks, and provided a cheap and useful tool for establishing a presence and perhaps “influence.”<sup>22</sup> The “Control” at the consulate at Meshed in 1887, Colonel Charles MacLean, employed Asian per-

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sonnel in dangerous work.<sup>23</sup> He reported that two messengers had been arrested in Merv, a small oasis settlement in Russian Central Asia. Agents "I" and "J" were compromised and had to be discharged. An agent in ring "C" went missing in November 1888 after being dispatched to get "photos of Russian guns, troops and barracks."<sup>24</sup>

According to MacLean's records, there were systematic searches at the border, and despite precautions such as using invisible ink in messages, more agents were going missing.<sup>25</sup> The consuls' duties in Meshed were dominated by monitoring relations between Afghanistan and Persia, but they also involved keeping a close watch on Russian Central Asia, particularly the routes that any troops destined for India would have to take.<sup>26</sup>

Asian and British agents, newswriters and attachés all sent their information either directly to the intelligence departments of London and Simla, or to the Foreign Ministry of the Government of India, the governor of the Punjab (which had responsibility for the North-West Frontier Province until 1901) or, in the case of Persia and the Gulf, to the Foreign Office.<sup>27</sup> The Indian native surveyors, the "Pundits," sent their geographical material to the Topographical and Survey Department, some

of which was subsequently published. Copies of reports containing intelligence with potential military value went to the Indian Intelligence Branch.

The need to gather intelligence on Central Asia was to assuage considerable fears of Russian capabilities and intentions and to detect any attempts by Tsarist agents to convert the natives. This was especially important in the case of the Afghans and Pathans, who, living on or near the frontiers, were beyond the full reach of the authorities. The mountainous environment made British fears about the security of the frontier even more acute.

### ***III. Kipling and the "Enemy Within"***

The targets of British intelligence in the Empire were not just external enemies, but internal subversives. Since all empires are, ultimately, created and held by coercion, gathering intelligence about potential or actual threats was regarded as essential to the survival of Britain's Empire. What is striking about British leaders, even in the heyday of imperialism in the 1890s, is their consistent concern about security. Joseph Chamberlain wrote in 1898: "We are the most powerful Empire in the world, but we are not all-powerful."<sup>28</sup>

The simple fact was that the colonial administrators were so small in number they did not have the capacity to construct police states. Indeed, as Richard Popplewell points out, there was contempt for the state apparatuses of Russia and other Oriental despotisms: "A strong aversion to the use of spies was one of the alien traditions of government which the British brought to India."<sup>29</sup> Tracing numerous episodes of where the British were badly informed, he shows that they sought to avoid harassment of the people, concluding: "What they could not afford was to alienate the Indian public on a substantial scale. The maintenance of British rule in India depended upon the acquiescence and participation of the ruled."<sup>30</sup>

Kipling's India reveals the depth of concern about the threat to the Raj from the native population, which lingered beneath the surface long after the traumas of the Indian Mutiny. The police were tasked to detect subversion—they would achieve varying degrees of success—but the authorities were also eager to influence the elites, the potential leaders of revolt, and, where possible, to shape public opinion. As C.A. Bayly argues, the idea was to regulate the means of communication so as to establish an "empire of opinion."<sup>31</sup>

The settings in Kipling's work are precisely at the margins of authority in the information order, seeking out the sinister "hidden hand" of rebels and for-

eigners. More than that, the assumption of Kipling's India is that disorder itself is threatening, with no acknowledgement of the inherently undemocratic nature of British colonial rule that would make protest necessary. Indeed, there was a tendency to conflate protest and threat and to see all public expressions of anger and frustration as indicative of latent native fanaticism. The sheer size of the native population meant that public disorder had to be taken seriously, and, as a general rule, prompt coercive action was preferred. Muslims, particularly those astride the frontier, were not only well armed and numerous, but also saw the Afghan king as their natural leader or, in the extreme, the caliph of the Ottoman Empire.

When it came to the interception of nationalist agitators, who began a bombing and assassination campaign before the First World War, there was little enthusiasm to consider political reforms. There were, nevertheless, considerable efforts to track down the conspirators who were directing the terrorist campaign from outside India. As Popplewell has demonstrated, this led to the surveillance of agitating movements in Britain and Asia.<sup>32</sup>

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their treachery toward the Empire and their dependence on foreign support. Instead, Kipling's idealized world is one where British intelligence is alert to the dangers, operates within the sub-strata of native society, and thwarts the conspirators to maintain British security.

Between 1899 and 1901, when Kipling was writing *Kim*, the Army in India was deployed to restore order no fewer than 69 times.<sup>33</sup> Concerns that the police were unreliable to the point of mutiny, not to mention the difficulties of gathering intelligence before an insurrection broke out, meant that the army was a vital instrument in maintaining order. Kipling was aware of its importance, and it is not purely coincidental that a British regiment features so prominently in *Kim*, making its presence felt by "showing the flag." Lord Roberts wrote:

*We cannot afford to let our Native troops or the people of India doubt the maintenance of our supremacy, which they certainly would if we were to allow Russia to overrun Afghanistan. We must let it be clearly seen that we do not fear Russia, and that we are determined she shall not approach near enough to India to cause us serious trouble in our rear.<sup>34</sup>*

Roberts felt that the British people supported a robust imperial defense policy.<sup>35</sup> The press and the enfranchised public could be used as tools to exert pressure on governments that did not exhibit sufficient resolve. When Roberts returned from the South African War, he was convinced that Britain's voluntary system of enlistment was no longer adequate. He set up the National Service League and asked if Kipling would "write some stirring lines to bring home to the public the danger of allowing ourselves to be a second time in the same risky position without any properly trained troops in the country."<sup>36</sup>

Kipling was an eager recruit. He was appalled by the fact that successive Liberal governments had neglected the army, given concessions to the Boers, and vacillated over Home Rule for Ireland, all of which were critical issues for the Empire. Kipling, however, did not share Roberts's faith in the British people and publicly criticized the complacency that seemed to prevail.

#### **IV. "A Yachting Story with a Purpose": Erskine Childers and The Riddle of the Sands**

The Edwardian period was a time of much anxiety and insecurity for the British Empire. Although the South African

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War (1899–1902) had been won, many Britons were left wondering how the British Army, numbering almost half a million soldiers, had taken nearly three years to defeat a guerrilla force of roughly 60,000 men. Goaded into the conflict by the British, the outnumbered Boers evoked great international sympathy, especially in France and Germany, leaving the British devoid of both friends and allies. In an age increasingly influenced by the doctrine of "survival of the fittest," as much between nations as individuals, certain voices suggested that England had somehow "gone soft" and that the nation was deteriorating physically.

Testament to the public mood, in 1905 a pamphlet entitled "The Decline and Fall of the British Empire" sold 12,000 copies in just six months.<sup>37</sup> British eyes also began to turn nervously toward Germany, which, seeking its "place in the sun" commensurate with its rising industrial strength, determined that Weltpolitik was impossible without the construction of a High Seas Fleet. In challenging the Royal Navy's dominance of the seas, the traditional lynchpin of national security, the kaiser undermined the wisdom of diplomatic isolation and provoked a state of profound unease concerning the vulnerability of

Britain's defensive preparations.

The air thick with fear and uncertainty, the spy novel began to reproach the authorities for what it saw as a chronic lack of preparedness against potential invasion. By any yardstick, the most famous spy thriller to address this was Erskine Childers's 1903 novel *The Riddle of the Sands*. Born into the governing class and schooled at Haileybury College, the principal Victorian training ground for Britain's colonial elite, Childers was a staunch imperialist.<sup>38</sup> "One can set no limits to the possibilities of an alliance of the English speaking races," he declared in a letter to Basil Williams, a close friend, in October 1903.<sup>39</sup>

The South African War deeply colored Childers's thinking. Shocked at the ease with which British forces had met their match at the hands of guerrillas, he developed an uncomfortable feeling that the Empire was in mortal danger. Childers became particularly concerned about Germany, which had made no secret of its sympathy for the Boers (even supplying armaments against the British troops). Like most of his fellow countrymen, he had been appalled by the notorious Kruger Telegram in 1896, a message sent by Kaiser Wilhelm II to the president of the South African Republic, con-

gratulating him on repelling the Jameson Raid, a sortie on the Transvaal from the British-controlled Cape Colony. Upon his return from the Boer War, therefore, he resolved himself to write a "yachting story, with a purpose." That purpose was to rouse the government to the German threat.

*The Riddle* occupied much of Childers's time between spring 1901 and winter 1902. He was not, by his own admission, a naturally accomplished writer of fiction. It is clear from his correspondences that he felt constrained by the medium and hampered by the need to provide titillation and a sense of climax consistent with literary conventions. "I fear the story is beyond me," he lamented in one letter.<sup>40</sup> "There is no sensation, only what it meant to be convincing fact," he grieved in another.<sup>41</sup>

Having finally submitted the draft shortly before Christmas 1902, Childers's worst fears were soon confirmed, when his publisher, Reginald Smith of Smith, Elder & Co, returned the manuscript forthwith, asking for "drastic" revisions. "My experience is that people will not take their literary publications in the close pemmican fare which you adopt," explained Smith.<sup>42</sup> With its forensic attention to detail, particularly with respect to all things nautical, the draft had none of the "flow and glow" required of a work of fiction. While caviar to the yachting fraternity, Childers's extensive use of cartographic materials

(see below), delineating (with exact depth indications) the telurian sands and archipelagos of the North Sea mudflats had the potential to “frighten the [general] reader away.” “The man who reads a work of imagination, however clearly founded on fact, is in a word not energetic,” tutored Smith.<sup>43</sup>

What really troubled the publisher about the manuscript was the complete omission of women. As it stood, *The Riddle* was very much a man’s book. It is worth remembering that, by the dawn of the 20th century, women (ever more literate following advances in education provided for girls, but still largely excluded from the public sphere) had become big consumers of fiction. At Smith’s insistence, therefore, the narrative had to offer more in the way of feminine interests.

For Childers, the thought of less sailing, fewer charts and more women was anathema.

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Sailing was a school of character, saying much for the grit and hardihood of young Britons; maps demonstrated the ease with which England could be invaded; while lashings of romance undermined the serious message contained in the book. After much procrastination on both sides, a compromise was eventually reached: the maps would not be cut; the book would now have a “love interest.” “I was weak enough to spatchcock a girl into it and find her a horrible nuisance,” grumbled Erskine in a private letter.<sup>44</sup>

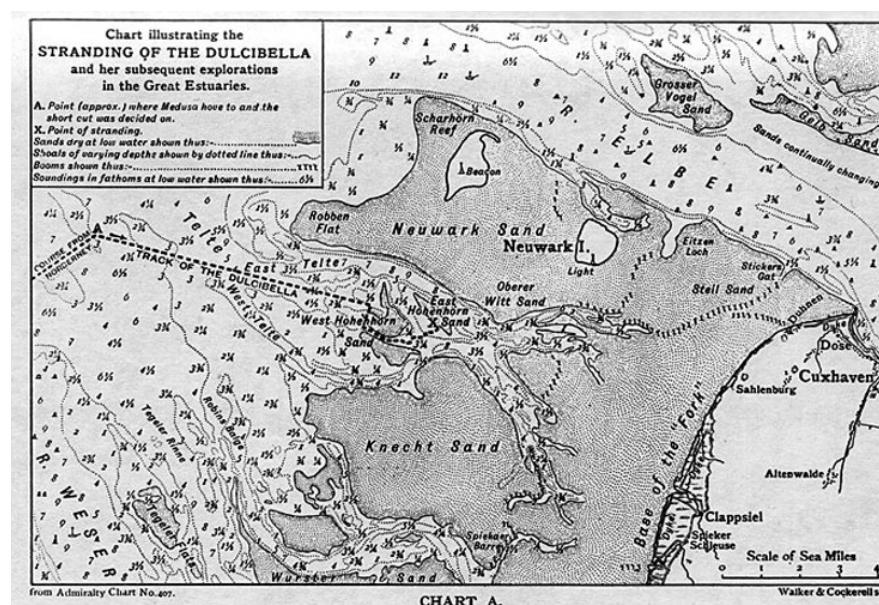
What then of the finished product? Drawing upon Childers’s own experiences of sailing along the German coast, which brought to the narrative an astonishing verisimilitude, *The Riddle* tells the story of two patriotic duffers—Messrs. Carruthers and Davies—embody-

ing all that was good about the adventurous English character, who lark about in a small seven-ton yacht—the *Dulcibella*—and explore islands in the North Sea.

When off the Frisian Islands duckshooting and incidentally fathoming the shoals and inlets thereabouts, they discover that the Germans, with the aid of an armada of shallow draft boats, plan to send troops across from the sand berms that adorn the lonely stretch of coast between Holland and Denmark. This was to be a surprise attack or, in military parlance, a coup de main.

With no shore defense on the East Anglian coast, and no British fleet permanently stationed in the North Sea, the two sailors conclude that a German D-Day, if launched, was bound to succeed. Mr. Davies points the finger of blame at Britain’s “blockheads of statesmen.”<sup>45</sup> At another point in the text, he gives the bluff declaration, “Those Admiralty chaps want waking up.”<sup>46</sup>

Thankfully for England, the mudlark and his companion foil the fiendish plot before it is too late. As if the propaganda masquerading as fiction was not enough, Childers also provided a postscript, which reminded readers about the growing capacity of Germany as a sea power—“We have no North Sea naval base, no North Sea Fleet, and no North Sea policy”—and



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Among Childers's more distinguished admirers was Kipling, who, from the 1890s onwards, was repeatedly denouncing his countrymen in the press for failing to prepare or take a firm stand against the "shameless Hun."

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called for the creation of a volunteer naval reserve, one that would take advantage of the unquenchable enthusiasm and untapped talents of the cruising fraternity.

The published version of *The Riddle* is less acerbic in its treatment of Germany than the draft manuscript. Whereas the draft is embroidered with Germanophobia, describing its cafés as "hostile" and referring to the "unconquered spirit" and "iron heel of Prussia," the published copy rejects nationalist stereotyping and implies that Germany is motivated by Realpolitik rather than ruthlessness.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the kaiser banned the book, and it is said that when Childers next went sailing in the Baltic, German spies followed his movements.

*The Riddle* was published in May 1903. Sales of the book were more than ample to justify the effort put into it. By the end of the year, it had become a best seller, going through three editions, plus a cheap "penny-packet" issue that sold more than 100,000 copies. Reviewed widely in the press, the book was greeted with widespread critical acclaim. The *Westminster Gazette*, which, as its title indicates, sought to be influential in parliamentary circles, called it a "literary accomplishment of much force and originality"; an anonymous critic of

a "Boston Newspaper" rhapsodized: "The author must be credited with an ability amounting to genius, to be compared in the minutia of his art only to Defoe and in the resources and fertility of his imagination to Robert Louis Stephenson."<sup>48</sup>

As England's newest literary sensation, Childers received many letters of congratulation. "You have written one of the most original books," gushed W.D. Howells. "Your people are wonderfully life-like. Davies is extraordinarily good, and the whole thing perfectly circumstanced."<sup>49</sup> In a particularly sycophantic letter, a Mr. K. Ward from Stanhope County Durham, wrote that the book had "stirred in me a fresh desire...to do a little for my country," prompting him to form a local rifle club presumably from where well-intentioned patriots could be trained to kill the "Boche."<sup>50</sup>

Among Childers's more distinguished admirers was Kipling, who, from the 1890s on, was repeatedly denouncing his countrymen in the press for failing to prepare or take a firm stand against the "shameless Hun." As well as excellent sales and reviews, *The Riddle* brought Childers, an eligible bachelor, to the front ranks of London's social scene.

The book's success was no fluke. Childers's skill as an author was to sense and to seize on glib contemporary talk about imperial collapse and foreign threats. The timing of its publication was in one sense brilliantly done to make maximum impact of the fallout from the South African War, when questions about national strength and efficiency, as well as the wisdom of diplomatic isolation, dominated both public and official discourse.

The book's release also coincided with the first wave of real public anxiety about Germany, with whom relations had soured markedly. By 1903, many island-folk were concerned that the Royal Navy was about to lose its mastery of the seas, thus increasing the possibility of invasion. Only a year earlier, in a speech to the Reichstag, Vice Admiral Livonius of the German navy had boldly pronounced:

*Carrying out a landing on the English coast has been greatly increased by the introduction of steam power. The possibility of steaming by night with lights covered in order to escape the enemy's observation, have much reduced the advantages of England's insular position.*<sup>51</sup>

Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany had begun launching its pre-dreadnought fleet, some of the largest and fastest warships ever built. A popular image was that of the kaiser—

kitted out in medals, sword and polished boots—breaking champagne bottles over the bows of impressive steam-powered vessels. Convinced that Nemesis was close at hand and saddled with xenophobic paranoia, the British press did nothing to subdue tensions, beating the patriotic drum and whipping up popular enthusiasm for remedying the very strategic deficiencies of which Childers had protested.

Demands for the government to “do something” were not in fact being ignored. Weeks before *The Riddle* was due to go to press, the Admiralty announced that it had selected a site on the Firth of Forth for a new North Sea naval base, causing Childers to insert a hasty postscript to the effect. A year earlier, His Majesty’s Government had set up a Committee of Imperial Defence to consider the expanding German battlefleet and its potential intentions.

Lord Selbourne, the First Lord of the Admiralty, took great interest in *The Riddle* (“I read [it] with much pleasure”), but with reservations. In a private letter, he disputed the claim of “No North Sea Policy,” suggesting that, “like so many other writers, he [Childers] takes it for granted that nothing goes on at the Admiralty, or is done by the Admiralty, except what the public happens to know.”<sup>52</sup> Selbourne rejected the book’s emphasis on the Forth as an essential buffer against German attack as representative of a “very common delusion”; “the

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*Pressure from backbenchers, especially those representing East Coast constituencies, prompted Lord Selbourne to ask the Naval Intelligence Division for a detailed report on the feasibility of a German invasion as outlined in the book.*

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only thing which really matters,” he went on, “is ships—believe me.”<sup>53</sup>

By contrast, Hugh Arnold-Forster, then parliamentary secretary to the Admiralty, was unreservedly impressed.<sup>54</sup> As was the highly influential Victorian war hero, Lord Wolseley, formerly commander-in-chief of the British forces:

*The subjects it deals with are most interesting. Few men in England have studied the question of the invasion of these islands more closely than I have done. When men perhaps laugh at this expression of mine, I always content myself with reminding them that I attach more weight to the opinions of Napoleon, Wellington, Nelson and Collingwood, than I do to theirs.*<sup>55</sup>

For Wolseley, what made the book more than ordinarily interesting was the minuteness of detail with which the narrative was loaded, the apparent perfect familiarity with the scene of the events described. Sailing the North Sea was known to be one of the author’s hobbies, and it was clear that his personal experiences had added a semblance of truth to what was, at its core, a pretty far-fetched narrative.

Pressure from backbenchers, especially those representing

East Coast constituencies, eventually prompted Lord Selbourne to ask the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) for a detailed report on the feasibility of a German invasion as outlined in the book. The most recent inquiry, carried out in 1902 on the assumption that France represented the main threat, had concluded that invasion was “not an eventuality which we need seriously consider.”<sup>56</sup>

After sending a “couple of experts” to reconnoiter the Friesian Coast, the NID reached the same conclusion, pointing out that the “want of railways and roads, the shallowness of the water, the configuration of the coast, not to mention the terrific amount of preparation of wharves, landing-places, causeways, sheds and whatnot besides, would have rendered a secret embarkation impossible.”<sup>57</sup> “As a novel it is excellent; as war plan it rubbish,” was the assessment of Lord Louis Battenberg, director of naval intelligence.<sup>58</sup>

This was not, however, the last of establishment interest in *The Riddle*. On 27 January 1906, Childers received a letter—marked “Secret”—from Julian Corbett, who, only months before, had become the Admiralty’s unofficial strategic adviser. Corbett explained that the Admiralty was “anxious” to get some information about the

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[The Riddle] set the stage for a whole slew of fictionalized spy stories that dealt with the specter of German invasion.

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Frisian Coast but had not thought it “expedient to send anyone to get it just now.”<sup>a59</sup>

Being an expert on the North Sea, Childers was invited to lunch with Captain Charles Ottley, Battenberg's successor as DNI. During the luncheon, Childers handed over copies of all of his nautical charts, delineating pilotage and topographical details. A few months later, Childers was contacted by Francis Gathorne-Hardy from the War Office Staff College. With a view to possible raids on the North German Coast, in the event of war, the War Office had instructed Gathorne-Hardy to collect geostrategic intelligence on the area and on the localities. During his researches, he had found that the existing War Office charts were hopelessly out of date, noting: “I find [us] rather lacking on information.”<sup>60</sup>

Having identified Borkum, Wangerooge and the Sylt Islands as possible bases from which to launch an amphibious assault upon the German main-

land, he asked Childers the following:

- Are they are defended and to what extent?
- What facilities do they possess both on harbors and on the open beaches for landing?
- What size ships can approach and lie in their harbors?
- Have the buoys been removed since the publication of your book?
- In your opinion, is there an easier landing that could be effected on any other point?<sup>61</sup>

Once again, Childers furnished the authorities with all that he could. On Gathorne-Hardy's insistence, Childers was required to keep secret his dealings with the War Office, since it “was not considered good form in England even to think of protection, much less retaliation.”<sup>62</sup>

Over time, *The Riddle* became core reading for anyone involved in naval policy or espionage. In April 1908, the Admiralty ordered 117 copies for use in its “Fiction Libraries.”<sup>63</sup> In 1912, the War Office issued a secret handbook, entitled *The Special Military Resources of the German Empire*, which praised the “brilliant imagination of the author of ‘The Riddle of the Sands’” and implored agents to familiarize themselves with its content.<sup>64</sup>

In illustrating both the commercial rewards and political leverage that could be had from the deceptive blending of fact and fiction—or “faction”—it set the stage for a whole slew of fictionalized spy stories that dealt with the specter of German invasion. As the next section will discuss, perhaps Childers's greatest legacy was in laying the foundation for the anti-German crusades of William le Queux, who, in concert with military careerists like Lt. Col. James Edmonds, played a part in the creation of Britain's modern intelligence service and thus changed the course of an empire.

#### **V. The Germans are Coming!: The Fiction of William le Queux**

After *The Riddle*, as Christopher Andrew argues, an increasingly prominent feature of Edwardian spy fiction was the seditious work of German spies.<sup>65</sup> If not for literary style and grace, then certainly for success and influence, the author typically associated with the devilish intrigues of the German Secret Service was William le Queux. Averaging five novels a year until his death in 1927, he was among the highest paid fiction writers of his time, earning 12 guineas per 1,000 words (roughly \$1,000 in today's money), the same rate as H.G. Wells and Thomas Hardy. An habitué of London clubland and inexhaustibly well-traveled across some of the Continent's most elite resorts, le Queux claimed to know

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<sup>a</sup> In 1910, the somewhat dilatory Admiralty did send two spies to the Frisian Islands. Unfortunately, in what became an international cause célèbre, Lt. Vivian Brandon and Capt. B.F. Trench were both detected and arrested by the Germans and pardoned by the kaiser three years later. During his trial in the imperial court at Leipzig, Brandon caused scenes of hysteria when he revealed that he had read *The Riddle* not once, but “three times.” See “British Spies Sentenced,” *Daily News*, December 1910.

everyone in Europe worth knowing, from Queen Alexandra, reputedly his biggest fan, to Emile Zola, the celebrated French writer who was instrumental in exonerating the falsely convicted army officer Alfred Dreyfus. Throughout his career, le Queux presented himself as a spymaster, who, with an intimate knowledge of foreign espionage, battled dastardly foreign nationals in the service of the British government. To this day, many of le Queux's distant relatives maintain that he was killed by Bolshevik thugs, while working as a secret agent in the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup>

The lessons of the Boer War bit deeply into le Queux's psyche: "History tells us that an Empire which cannot defend its own possessions must inevitably perish," he would later write.<sup>67</sup> Like Childers, he set out to use fiction as a vehicle for political pamphleteering, designed to awaken the government to the uncomfortable truth that England had become idle and complacent, whereas rival nation states were fast becoming virile and purposeful.

In common with military threat assessment at the turn of the century, he had in fact started his literary career not as a Germanophobe, but as a Francophobe, predicting conflict between England and France. In 1894, he shot to fame with *The Great War in England in 1897*, which depicted an attempted French invasion. Unlike George Chesney's earlier tale of war-to-

*Obsessed with the end of empire and fearing the encroachment of "beastly foreigners" into the United Kingdom, le Queux began to forward reports to the Foreign Office.*

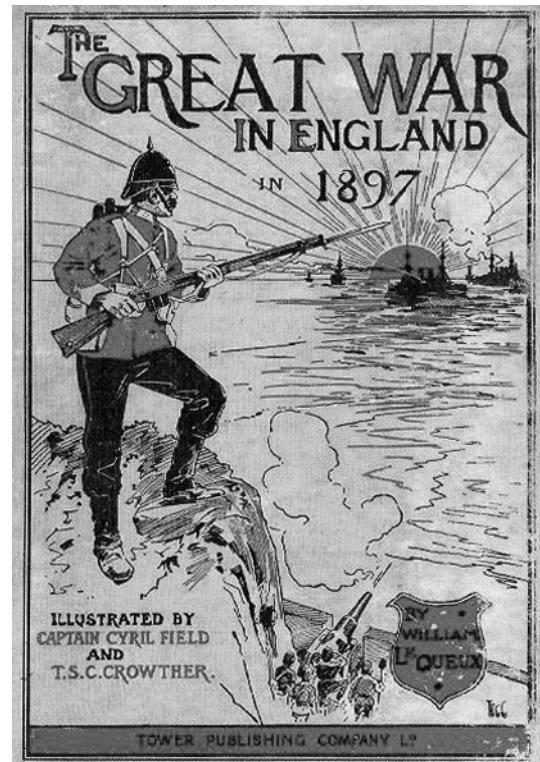
come, *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), which ended with the British being soundly defeated, *The Great War in England* concluded with English victory.

Five years later, published only months after the Fashoda Incident, the territorial dispute between Britain and France in the Sudan, *England's Peril* (1899) introduced readers to Gaston La Touche, the villainous chief of the French Secret Service. In *England's Peril*, a member of Parliament has his head blown off by, it eventually transpires, an explosive cigar. By 1906, as bad blood began to arise between Britain and the kaiser, following the start of the dreadnought race that threatened to render obsolete British battleship supremacy, Germany replaced France as the main enemy in le Queux's novels. As David Stafford argues, like any successful author, he "kept an eye on the shifting tides of public opinion."<sup>68</sup>

Obsessed with the end of empire and fearing the encroachment of "beastly foreigners" into the United Kingdom, le Queux began to forward reports to the Foreign Office, which, taken at face value, confirmed the existence of a German spy network in Britain. These reports, he claimed, came from an

informant in Berlin.<sup>69</sup> With no evidence to corroborate his allegations, however, the authorities dismissed the reports as wishful thinking.

His pleas falling on deaf ears, le Queux adopted a new approach, using his social skills and immense clubability to seek, and acquire, the friendship of senior crown servants. By early 1906, he had gained a valuable ally in Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, one of the most admired naval officers of his generation, considered by many to be a personification of John Bull. Eager to promote his views about the development of the fleet, Beresford lent his great public voice to numerous



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*Northcliffe rejected the first draft. His main objection was that the invading German army avoided the major cities, and thus the majority of Daily Mail readers.*

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articles written by le Queux on the need for preparedness.

Le Queux's most important coadjutor was Lord Roberts. Just as the famous general had assisted Kipling, he shared le Queux's anxiety about Britain's unreadiness for a major contest of arms: "My dear William, the world thinks me a lunatic also, because, after forty years service in India, I have come home and dared to tell England that she is unprepared for war."<sup>70</sup> As president and moving spirit of the National Service League, a pressure group for compulsory military training, Roberts saw an alliance with le Queux as an opportunistic way of canvassing public support for conscription, opposed by many people at the time for smacking of continental militarism.

Having secured the priceless imprimatur of Lord Roberts, le Queux began to plan for *The Invasion of 1910*, a graphic imagining of a successful invasion of England by a 40,000-strong German army. Funding for the project was provided by Lord Northcliffe, proprietor of Britain's first mass-circulation newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. As a pathological Germanophobe, with an instinctive flair for a profitable story, Northcliffe was only too willing to stump up the cash in return for exclusive serialization rights.

Striving for realism, le Queux consulted military experts like

Col. Cyril Field and Major Matson; he even spent four months touring the southeast of England in order to map out the most likely invasion route. As he wrote in the preface, the aim was to "bring home to the British public vividly and forcibly what really would occur were an enemy suddenly to appear in our midst."<sup>71</sup>

A tough taskmaster, Northcliffe rejected the first draft. His main objection was that the invading German army avoided the major cities, and thus the majority of *Daily Mail* readers. To rectify this, le Queux was required to devise a new route, one where sales took precedence over accuracy.

*The Invasion* began its serialization on 13 March 1906. In London, itinerant sandwich-board men, employed by the *Daily Mail* and dressed in spiked helmets, Prussian uniforms and bloodstained gloves, bellowed at city workers, warning them of the Hun's arrival in the nation's capital. The story was centered on German troops advancing inland, until they eventually reached London. As they went, the fierce, jack-booted soldiers despoiled farmland, looted churches, violated women, mutilated babies and bayoneted resistance fighters. Le Queux described how a hundred German spies, prior to the assault, had paralyzed Britain's defenses by cutting telephone lines and destroying

bridges, rail tracks and coal staithes.

Newspaper serialization came with a special map, illustrating the regions and towns where the Germans were to be concentrated. Just south of Cambridge, there was to be the "Great Battle"; in the fields between Loughborough and Leicester, there was to be "Considerable Fighting."<sup>72</sup> Readers were instructed to keep the map for reference—"It will be valuable."

*The Invasion* was explicit in agitating for a system of national service and in its denunciation of Britain's slumbering statesmen for failing to prepare for a possible invasion. Splashed across the top of each extract was the eye-catching headline, "WHAT LORD ROBERTS SAYS TO YOU," followed by: "The catastrophe that may happen if we still remain in our present state of unpreparedness is vividly and forcibly illustrated in Mr. le Queux's new book, which I recommend to the perusal of everyone who has the welfare of the British Empire at heart."<sup>73</sup>

*The Invasion* was a huge success, boosting the *Daily Mail's* circulation and, in book form, selling over 1 million copies in 27 languages. Although the literary cognoscenti berated the somewhat primitive composition of the writing, le Queux could not have been happier. With Roberts on his side, he established his bona fides as a serious author; with Northcliffe offering column-inches, he had a

suitable forum for his anti-German views; and with high sales, he now had ample private means to fund his counterespionage work. Encouraged by the public's response, le Queux and Roberts founded a voluntary Secret Service Department, a group of amateur spy hunters devoted to gathering information "that might be useful to our country in case of need."<sup>74</sup>

By contrast, the government was not amused. In Parliament, Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman said that le Queux was a "pernicious scaremonger" and suggested that the story risked inciting war between England and Germany.<sup>75</sup> This is not to say, however, that officials could ignore the invasion bogey. Public pressure to reconsider the question of overseas attack caused Campbell-Bannerman to appoint a subcommittee of Committee of Imperial Defence, which met 16 times between 27 November 1907 and 28 July 1908, and included dignitaries like David Lloyd George and Edward Grey. On the first day of the group's convening, testimony was given by none other than Lord Roberts. During his time in the spotlight, the aging military hero rehashed the invasion plan as predicted by le Queux's melodrama. To the delight of Sir John Fisher, then first sea lord and father of the ultra-modern dreadnought, the sub-committee concluded that an invasion was untenable so long as a large, technologically-advanced navy was maintained.<sup>76</sup>

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*Moreover, because they were gentlemen, they somehow made spying acceptable, even honourable, to a readership brought up to believe that espionage was a dirty trade.*

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Le Queux was, of course, not the only fiction writer transfixed with the sinister machinations of German spies. Le Queux's biggest rival was the self-styled "Prince of Storytellers," E. Phillips Oppenheim. An outspoken critic of unpreparedness, Oppenheim demanded the internment of enemy aliens and supported Lord Roberts's campaign for the introduction of compulsory national service among able-bodied men.

Central to Oppenheim's yarns, as with those of Childers and le Queux, was the importance of the gifted amateur. Typically well-born and wealthy, heroes were accidental rather than professional spies, always proving, under severe test, to be of sterling worth. In *The Great Secret* (1907), the lead character—while in London playing cricket for his county—is inadvertently drawn into defending his nation when he discovers a German spy ring operating from the Café Suisse in Soho. As both David Stafford and David Trotter have argued, ruling-class amateurs "were not only heroes in their own right but also guardians of the social hierarchy"; set apart by their gentlemanliness, they represented a "symbol of stability" in a time of increasing working-class agitation.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, because they were gentleman, they somehow made spying acceptable, even honourable, to a readership brought up to

believe that espionage was a dirty trade.

Though others had muscled in on the genre, le Queux ultimately trumped them all with *Spies of the Kaiser*. Published in 1909, and preceded by an advertising campaign in the *Weekly News* offering readers £10 for information on "Foreign Agents in Britain," *Spies* pitted Ray Raymond—"a patriot to his heart's core"—against literally thousands of German spies, most of them nestled in the English countryside, disguised as landlords, waiters, and barbers. In detailing the German hidden hand, le Queux was adamant that his novel was based on "serious facts," unearthed over a 12-month period touring the United Kingdom:

*As I write, I have before me a file of amazing documents, which plainly show the feverish activity with which this advance guard of our enemy is working to secure for their employers the most detailed information.*<sup>78</sup>

To combat this menace, the book championed the creation of a professional counterintelligence service, a message that chimed with public fears of invasion—now at "fever-pitch" with the kaiser's announcement in late 1908 of an accelerated shipbuilding program.<sup>79</sup> Frightened members of the public inundated the novelist's

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*This assessment, derived not from hard facts...but from information ascertained from amateur spycatchers, led directly to the formation of the Secret Service Bureau.*

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mailbox with alleged sightings of German spies. Letters detailed German espionage in all its forms, from the surveillance of beaches, fortifications, and shipyards to the purloining of secret treaties, war plans, and blueprints. Although the majority of these reports were pure fantasy, le Queux earnestly forwarded them to Lt. Col. James Edmonds, head of MO5, the fledgling counterintelligence section of the War Office Directorate of Military Operations.

Convinced of the existence of enemy spies ("nearly every German clerk in London spends his holidays on biking or walking tours in the eastern counties"),<sup>80</sup> but also with one eye on securing funding for his own fledgling outfit, Edmonds had long been nagging Richard Haldane, secretary of state for war, on the shortcomings of British espionage. Haldane, who still harbored hopes of a rapprochement with Germany, had hitherto demurred at this assessment, believing that enemy agents were really "the apparatus of the white slave traffic."<sup>81</sup> For Edmonds, therefore, le Queux's "evidence" was a godsend.

By early 1909, the traditionally unflappable Haldane had judged that le Queux's reported sightings, however far-fetched, had just enough plausibility to merit an investigation. In March, he set up a committee to

consider "the nature and extent of foreign espionage that is at present taking place within this country."<sup>82</sup> Edmonds, the committee's chief witness, informed members of a rapid rise in "cases of alleged German espionage": five in 1907; 47 in 1908; and 24 in the first three months of 1909.<sup>83</sup> Of the 24, le Queux had provided five—although, in the service of anonymity, he was referred to only as a "well-known author." The individuals accused by le Queux of being German spies included: a cyclist who swore in German when nearly run over by the author in his motorcar; a Portsmouth hairdresser, named Schweiger, who apparently took much interest in navy gossip and consortied with officers; and a retired captain, called Max Piper, who was believed to act as a "go-between" for German agents based in the United Kingdom.<sup>84</sup>

Astonishingly, le Queux and his associates' material was instrumental in persuading members to reach the conclusion:

*The evidence which was produced left no doubt in the minds of the committee that an extensive system of German espionage exists in this country, and that we have no organization for keeping in touch with that*

*espionage and for accurately determining its extent or objectives.<sup>85</sup>*

This assessment, derived not from hard facts reported by the police authorities, but from information ascertained from amateur spycatchers, led directly to the formation of the Secret Service Bureau, forerunner of MI5 and MI6, in late 1909.

Historical research has now proved beyond any doubt that no such "extensive system of German espionage" existed. Between August 1911 and the outbreak of the Great War, MI5 apprehended and tried only a handful of suspected spies. Although the spy ring of Gustav Steinbauer was rounded up, the German spymaster ran no more than 20 poorly trained agents, focused for the most part on rivers and beaches rather than military installations. What this underlines is the fact that in 1909 officials had been completely deceived. In successfully hoodwinking the establishment into a state of total delusion, le Queux—unbelievably—had played a key role in the creation of the modern British intelligence community.

*The Great War* gave le Queux the ideal canvas on which to paint his political beliefs. In no fewer than 40 novels relating to the conflict, published between 1914 and 1918, he argued for more counterespionage, bigger ships, and a stronger stand against immigration. Convincing that every stranger with a guttural accent was a spy in

disguise, he continued to flood government departments with reports of “German officers in mufti.”

By the war’s end, however, evidence suggests that the authorities had finally wised up to le Queux’s febrile imagination. In August 1914, paranoid that the Germans were out to get him on account of his counterintelligence work and involvement with M05, he wrote to the Metropolitan Police requesting that local “Bobbies” give him and his family special protection:

*Owing to the fact that for a number of years I have interested myself in the tracing and identification of German spies in England and in laying them before the proper authorities... threats have been conveyed to me that the gentry in question intend to do me bodily harm!*

A reply was sent to the effect that the local police would make a “short beat” near his house. Not satisfied with this, le Queux took to carrying a pistol before protesting to Edward Henry, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police: “Although I continue to be threatened and am unfortunately a ‘marked man’ by Germans, I am being afforded no special protection whatsoever.”<sup>86</sup>

Over the next few months, his tactic was to engulf the local station sergeant with reports of German intruders infiltrating his premises, only to be driven

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off by guard dogs. On 17 November, he wrote, “On two occasions...strangers have been prowling about my property with evil intent, presumably to inquire about my private Wireless station, or, possibly, to make an attempt upon myself and my family.”<sup>87</sup> Henry nevertheless saw him as “not a person to be taken seriously” and refused to fulfill his request.<sup>88</sup>

In a final desperate bid to secure protection, le Queux sent a series of fawning letters to Patrick Quinn of Scotland Yard’s Special Branch, promising that, if Quinn were willing, le Queux would “urge certain influential gentlemen” to recommend that [Quinn] should be placed in supreme command of the whole department and given complete powers, with “no superior authority.”<sup>89</sup> The “influential gentlemen” whose ears the fabulist apparently had included Lord Leith of Fyvie, Lord Portsmouth, Holcombe Ingleby, and Cecil Harmsworth—men who believed that present police methods for dealing with enemy aliens were insufficient and ineffective.

By now, however, no one was going to be taken in by le Queux’s anxieties. The Metropolitan Police severed all contact with him, even issuing a circular, entitled “Mr. Le Queux,” warning officials that he should be “viewed in the proper perspective.”<sup>90</sup> According to the circular, this was a

man whose attention had been so long centered on German spies that the subject had become a “monomania with him.” Although le Queux, in his own eyes, was a “person of importance and dangerous to the enemy,” to the establishment he had now come to be seen as a charlatan.

### Conclusion

While it is clear that Kipling, Childers, and le Queux were prone to exaggeration, their works were based on reality and, more importantly, reflected both an idealized view of Britain’s imperial needs and a desire for greater security. The anxieties they represented were not entirely without foundation and appear all the more authentic when we remember that they were often passed on by military figures.

Fiction is more believable when anchored in reality, and it is the case that early 20th century spy fiction was used to push genuine agendas, including calls for a national service army, a larger navy, and a secret service. Though they celebrated imperialism and the qualities that built it, they also represented a tool for the mobilization of opinion and stood as clarion calls against perceived complacency in Whitehall.

In *Kim*, Kipling’s characters speak of the need to combat Russian intrigue on the North-

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*For intelligence officers in the 21st century, perhaps the most important message of this story is that popular culture, however seemingly absurd, can easily translate itself into real policy.*

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West Frontier at a time when Britain was engaged in a genuine protracted struggle for influence in Afghanistan and the Indian borderlands. In *The Riddle*, Childers's hero reveals secret German naval schemes at the precise moment when the Royal Navy was being confronted by the kaiser's menacing warship-building program. New naval technologies also inspired the anxieties of le Queux. In many of his novels, German spies are invariably found reconnoitering potential invasion beaches or attempting to pilfer important naval secrets.

For le Queux, the problem was not so much the Royal Navy's inability to destroy the German Navy, but the complacency of the British government. His lobbying, like that of Childers, was instrumental in fostering a mania for spies, but it also led to a more

sober debate in the armed forces about the true nature of the threat, which went some way to inspiring the formation of the Secret Service Bureau. Moreover, the creation of the India Political Intelligence Office, also in 1909, along with the long-standing employment of Asian agents and the activities of the Intelligence Branch in India, points to a similar reaction by the British authorities in India. In essence, then, fin de siècle spy novelists gauged public opinion and tailored their works accordingly, drawing heavily on actual events, complacency among the authorities, and fear about potential enemies—phenomena which were not fictional at all.

For intelligence officers in the 21st century, perhaps the most important message of this story is that popular culture, however seemingly absurd, can easily translate itself into real

policy. In a significant recent article, intelligence historian Rob Dover argued that television shows like *24* and *Spooks* have an important "real world impact," conditioning both public and official discourse about intelligence.<sup>91</sup> In the early 20th century, that golden evening of Empire, the real world impact of spy fiction was considerable. *The Riddle* had a profound effect on British naval policy. *Le Queux*, for all his sins, has a genuine claim to be considered the "father" of the British intelligence community. Were it not for his far-fetched tales of German espionage, it may well have been months, perhaps years, before dozing authorities woke up to the need for a professional counterintelligence service. Indeed, it is chilling to think what the consequences would have been had the authorities not been influenced by le Queux and persisted with their dilatory strategy towards the intrigues of the German Secret Service.



## **Notes**

1. Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
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